

A Mother's Love

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[0 : 00] Now, just for a short while this morning, I want to turn back to the passage you read in Isaiah, chapter 49.

And I'm going to particularly just pick on two verses that we have in this chapter, because it's, as I mentioned earlier, it's a chapter, or Isaiah is a book that, where the Prophet Isaiah living in Israel at the time, is the whole nation's kind of broken down spiritually.

And Israel is, during Isaiah's reign, Israel is going to be taken into captivity by Assyria. And then Judah, the two tribes of Judah, as opposed to the 10 tribes of Israel, Judah will be taken also into captivity later on in Babylon.

And they've fallen away from their worship of the Lord, their idolatrous and their under-God's discipline. And Isaiah's speaking into that, both in terms of judgment and in terms of hope.

And really from chapter 39 onwards, it's much more about hope and about the future. But he calls on them, in verse 13, he calls on them to sing praise and to break forth in praise and in singing.

[1 : 15] But they have none of it. They'll have none of this praise and worship to God, because they say in verse 14, the Lord has forsaken us.

The Lord has forgotten me. It's a singular, just singular speaking for the whole nation. It's just that the Lord is nowhere to be seen. He said, well, why should we praise Him? He's abandoned us.

He's left us alone. He's forsaken us. And we're surrounded by nations, pagan nations, that are very soon going to take us into captivity and enslave us.

And we're going to be taken out of the promised land. His land flowing with milk and honey, all the promises of God are going to be broken. And you've abandoned us, God, and you've forsaken us.

Barren and spiritually dull. Now you may feel like that. You may not. You may have felt like that. You may feel like that sometime in the future.

[2 : 09] It may be that over this last year, and we're kind of really wanting just to spend a little bit of time reflecting on the character of God as well.

It's been a difficult year. It's been a tough year. It may have been a particularly tough year for you spiritually. It's certainly been a tough year for us as a church. And there can be times when we go through experiences like that, and we do feel forsaken.

We do feel like God is far away. We wonder where the earth He is. We wonder why He's not answering our prayers, and we feel that all His promises are a little bit empty in our lives that they don't seem to be coming to fruition.

And that is kind of how Israel felt as they were, as the shadow, the dark shadow of captivity and of oppression and of slavery was coming upon them.

And all I want to do is I just want to finish this year in our public worship together with two very powerful and evocative pictures from God as He speaks into that situation, and may speak into the same kind of situation you feel.

[3 : 20] And even if you don't feel like that, I think they're very powerful and helpful images and unexpected images in many ways that we get from God in this passage. And the first one is that of a mother's love.

He, because verse 14, but Zion said, the Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me. That's the people of Israel saying that, so corporately.

And then God speaks in response. He answers them with a question, and He says, can a woman forget her nursing child, a mother, that she has no compassion on the son of her womb, even though she may forget yet, I will not forget you?

And so He answers their question about being forsaken and about being forgotten, about being abandoned by giving this amazing picture of a nursing mother and saying, is it possible?

The mother's here, the children here have had mothers who have mothers who have had mothers, parents, and all of us can, can a mother forget her child, especially her child that is nursing at her breast, can she forget that child?

[4 : 33] And He uses that picture that, because He wants us to understand that His love for us and His remembrance of us is greater even than the tenderest and most loving parent that there is in the universe.

The closest bond between mother and child, between parent and children is given here as an illustration, but He says, even though sometimes a mother might forget, and occasionally it kind of eats us up in our hearts, doesn't it?

We recoil from it, don't we, when we hear about sometimes a story of a mother that abandons her child. Maybe fathers do it more often, but a mother abandoning or being found guilty of neglect or abandonment of a child.

It seems we recoil from that picture, but God says, even if they may forget, and sometimes a mother will forget, He says, I will never forget you.

And it's a great picture of God's great love for us, and it's a maternal picture. It's kind of unusual in the Bible, we so often, and maybe you often characterize God, because He's characterized mainly in the Bible in masculine terms, but of course He's not masculine or feminine.

[5 : 58] He is a spirit, God is a spirit, infinite and eternal and changeable, and He is neither male nor female, but He's described very often in male terms biblically, but He is also described in maternal and in feminine terms as well, because in God's image, male and female were made.

And I wonder if you struggle to picture God in a maternal way, we call Him Father and rightly so. But we're given this great maternal picture of God, a God who has loving compassion on His children.

If you're a child of God, if you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, you're in this relationship with God, a new relationship, a relationship of promise and of love, where He will provide for us, and He says He will give us what we need, not always what we want, and the parents here know the difference, don't they, between giving what our children would like and what they need.

And maybe Christmas time has maybe been a particular reminder of that to us. And they open their present, maybe not what they were wanting, but they got something that they needed very much in their lives.

And the loving wonder of the gifts that God gives. But more, not only when children hunger, but when they're upset also, what do they do?

[7 : 29] They find their mother's breast, don't they? They come and find a mother's embrace, because that's the safe place. Well, remember that, don't we? Who are hurt? Are we graze or knee?

Are we fall? When we're small, maybe not when we're so big, but when we're small, we run to our mother's arms for comfort and for strength and for warmth.

And there's that instinctive relationship, selfless relationship, sacrificial relationship between a mother and her child.

And God uses as a picture of his instinctive and maternal and protective and renewing and reviving love for us.

It's a unique bond that we have spiritually in Jesus Christ with God. Now you know that physically there's a unique bond between a mother and her child, the child she's born.

[8 : 26] An umbilical bond, we could say, and that speaks into the bond that God has with us through Jesus Christ, because there is an image there of the spiritual bond that we have in Christ that when we came to Christ, you might not remember it, you might not have sensed it as such, but you were born again, you were born anew into a relationship with God.

And He gives birth, as it were, the Savior God gives birth to a people, to a nation, to an individual, to a church. We are born into His kingdom.

We are adopted into His royal line. His divine line, we become those who are with spiritual genetics linked to God through the Holy Spirit in dwelling us, and that indissoluble link is through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

And you can, as long as she's alive, I hope you can always go back to your mum.

But what about God? As a Christian, do you feel as dry as a desert today in your spiritual walk? Is it that you feel far from Him?

[9 : 47] Do you feel guilty? Do you feel you've gone too far? He says, trust me, I will never forget you. I haven't forsaken you, and I definitely haven't forgotten you.

My arms are open. It's the prodigal father picture as well, isn't it? And we're always encouraged to come back. We're always encouraged into His presence and into His company.

This is not about how good we are and how much effort we put into our lives as Christians. It's the recognition that when God looks at us, God is the nursing mother or the prodigal father, He sees His own Son Jesus in His perfection because His believers were covered in His righteousness.

So that's the first picture that we get, a nursing mother. The second picture is an engraved palm. An engraved palm.

Behold, I have engraving you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are continually before me. So He's wanting to strengthen the image, not just of a mothering child, but then He gives us a different picture of our names being engraved on His palms.

[11 : 06] It's a great picture of how God remembers us that we're not forgotten. You know, that's why I got the kids to draw their hands and write their names on it.

So if you've done that, kids, then that's what we're talking about here because it says, I will engrave you on the palm of my hands. And it's more even than just our names.

He says, I will engrave you on the palm of my hands. Our very being. Our whole personality is symbolically or in a picture engraved on the palm of God's hand and He has done the engraving.

It's not just the picture isn't of us sneaking into God's presence and writing our name on His hands. He remembers me. It's that God has done it Himself.

The moment we came to Christ and put our trust in Christ, our names were engraved on the palm of His hands. Our very being was engraved. Now, what does that mean?

[12 : 12] Well, it's simply the hands in the Bible are the source of a person's action and strength. You know, the Psalms a lot speak about the right hand of God and it usually means the hand of His power, you know, the King's right hand.

The hand was always the source of action, the source of power, the source of significance. It's also a picture, a vision of always being before us, always being before His eyes.

It probably doesn't happen now because everyone's got social media and phones and notes on their phones. But in the old days, if you wanted to remember something, you quite often had a pen and you just wrote it on your hand because it was a great way to remember it because your hands are always there.

They're kind of in front of you. And if you're doing anything, you can see what's written on your hand. Sometimes it was the back of your hand, you would write it in. But it's this whole picture of the hand being the active source of divine activity and strength.

And really what he's saying is in all that he does, in all that God does, in all that God has allowed to happen today, in all his sustaining of the world in which we live, in everything that He's done, He has His people before His mind and in His thoughts.

[13 : 43] More than that, it's that actually everything that is happening is happening with His people in mind, with you and I in mind.

The universe is moving to the tune of our redemption, to the work that He has done in us and will bring to completion when He returns.

Our lives, everything that happens, everything that's happening in this world, it's happening because He's bringing in His people. He's bringing in all those who will trust in Him until every single one of them comes in and then He will return.

So our lives, everything we do has significance because they're before the mind of God. And as we trust in Him and as we rely on Him, our lives have great significance in His presence and in His power and in His grace.

So whatever circumstances might be saying, whatever circumstances might appear to make us feel that we are forsaken or forgotten by God, He's saying, no, absolutely not.

[15 : 04] Even in the dark circumstances, the difficult circumstances, the suffering, He says, you're not forgotten, I am there working through them and they're bringing you forward as gold as it were.

They're defining us as gold to make us more and more like Him in our lives. So the engraved palm speaks of His commitment to us and that His power works on our behalf.

But there also surely must be here in the mind of God, a different, a deeper picture, not just that image of us being engraved in the palm of His hands as an image, but surely it points forward to Jesus Christ Himself, His indestructible love for Christ in glory.

Now with His resurrected body is in heaven, but still has nail-pierced hands and feet.

So there's this sense in which the church and the people of God, every believer is physically ingrained into Christ's palms through the nail-pierced hands and feet.

[16 : 27] You know, the image of being engraved comes from being hewn out of rock. It's not just a simple, it's scrolling or writing.

It's the idea of being hewn from rock, not a surface scratch. Being deliberate, something very permanent. And that engraving on the hands of God is very much what is being spoken of here, that is deliberate, sacrificial suffering of Jesus in His nail-pierced hands and feet for our salvation.

And He then goes on to say, Your walls are continually before Me. When He's speaking to Jerusalem, He's speaking to the people of God, He's speaking to the city of God, and He says, Your walls are ever before Me.

And it's an interesting picture because very soon these walls would be broken down and would be destroyed as the Assyrians and then the Babylonians come and take Judah into captivity and Israel into captivity.

But it's as if God, when He sees the walls of Jerusalem, sees something different, doesn't see them broken down, doesn't see them as they represent all the idolatry and the sinfulness and the failure of the people, but rather sees the walls as He intended them, perfect, protective and created to be part of the great city of God.

[18 : 01] And these pictures are repeated in Isaiah 65 and Revelation 20. Especially Revelation 20, which speaks about heaven and it speaks about the walls, when the twelve apostles being the foundations of the walls.

And it's a picture of the heavenly Jerusalem, which again is paralleled with the earthly broken down material Jerusalem.

And I think there's again a reminder there of what God sees when He sees us. He doesn't see our lives as broken down and crumbling and failed.

He sees the bigger picture. He sees the finished article. He actually sees what Christ has done and achieved for us. He sees the righteousness of Christ and He sees us as a glorified people.

He sees us as what we will be. He doesn't, when He looks at us, He doesn't register us in judgment or even our temporal condition when we're Christians.

[19 : 08] He doesn't even see how weak our faith is. He knows it. But what He sees is Jesus Christ and He sees the commitment and strength of Jesus Christ to us and the reality that Jesus will take us home and will perfect us.

And as we close a year, I think it's good to remember that. It's good to remember that it's not all about us and it's not all in our hands and it's not all about our success or even our faithfulness important though these things can be.

It's all about Christ and what He's done and we hold on to Him and we trust in Him and we rejoice in Him for who He is. So I think at the end of the year, as I conclude, there's always a need within us for self-reflection.

For asking about whether the last year was a year where we honoured Christ, where we followed Him, where we grew in our desire for Him, where He was more important to us than other things.

Where He took first place, not second, third or maybe even last place. And where we also consider our responses to our experiences that we go through.

[20 : 27] If it's been a year where we've felt forsaken or that we feel forgotten. Reminding us to look to who Jesus is, His strength and His purposes.

We are after all, all of us, a year nearer eternity. So I think it's important then that we do examine our lives.

Later on in Isaiah, when He's speaking to the people, He says to them, Behold the Lord's hand is not shortened, it cannot save again that picture of His hand, of His strength. Or is He your dull that He cannot hear.

But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God. And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear. So isn't there always that challenge to look at whether, rather than blaming God for our Christian lives and our sense of forsakenness and our sense of being forgotten, that maybe it's our sins that have separated us, that it's our sins that have kept Him from hearing and listening as it were to us.

And He wants us to deal with that. That's why we celebrate the Lord's Supper. He says, because we examine ourselves. And we look, and maybe at the end of the year, it's a great time to do that, just to examine ourselves.

[21 : 40] Is there sin in our lives and hearts we need to deal with, that we need to confess, that we need to repent from? Do we need to cry out confession?

On our own behalf, confession is a church, confession is a people. Do we see the importance of overcoming sometimes the barriers in our own hearts and lives to sensing God's love, asking Him to show us, Lord, is there any way in me that you want to deal with?

Is there anything that's keeping me from knowing you better, from loving you, and from not feeling forsaken and forgotten by you? So examine our lives, very important.

Give praise. Verse 13, which was the first response that we looked at. Sing for joy, O heavens exalt, O earth, break forth, O mountains into singing, for the Lord is comforted as people and will have compassion on His afflicted.

Give praise. We're called to be a people of praise. We're called to sing praise to Him. We're called to remember that things are not as they seem, because there is a plan, there is a purpose, and God in His grace and His love is at the very centre of that purpose, and will take us like a nursing mother, like a prodigal father into His own arms.

[22 : 57] I will never forget you. Maybe you particularly need to hear that this morning. I will never. God says, I will never forget you. Isn't that amazing? God said, now if I said that, or if anyone said that here, we would think, well, okay, that's nice, but we've got fading memories.

The older we get, our memories are not that great. And maybe it wouldn't be that important even if we could remember. But for God to say, for God to say, for God to say, I will never forget you.

Now, these are words you want to hear. These are words that are very meaningful. Truly amazing. You know, within a number of generations, we'll all be forgotten by most people, maybe by everyone, and soon by everyone, you know.

But God says, I will never forget you. That's a great thing, maybe particularly in the world, where we can seek to gain significance by being unforgettable.

But nobody's really unforgettable, are they? And we soon forget, even the most famous of people, we soon forget.

[24 : 21] But isn't it utterly astonishing? And isn't it a great reason today for praise that if you're in Christ, if you're known by God because you've given your heart and life to the Lord Jesus Christ, He says, I will never, I will never forget you.

And it's a challenge if you're not a Christian to come to faith in Jesus Christ, to hear these words, to give praise, to examine our lives, and also to share our faith.

In verse 22, there's this kind of, it's quite difficult picture, but the people of God are asking, who are all these people around us here? Who are all these children?

We were barren and bereaved in it. All of a sudden, there's all these children here. And it's just a picture of the broadening out of the kingdom, and it's a picture moving forward as Isaiah often does of the gospel moving out to the Gentiles, not just to the Jews, but the gospel going out into the whole world.

Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations and raise my signal to the peoples, and they shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried in their shoulders. And it's just this picture of the gospel moving forward, the great commission going out into the world, and bringing in those who are to be gathered into the kingdom.

[25 : 38] It's just a great promise of hope in Isaiah, of the gospel spreading out, even to Edinburgh. Even to Edinburgh.

And we live in a society where I think there's a lot of people who feel forgotten and forsaken, and maybe in darkness, and who need to know about the great light as Jesus Christ.

We have that great responsibility and that great privilege of sharing our faith as those who are New Testament Gentile believers belonging to the covenant, to share our faith, to usher other people in, and to help them to come to that place of trust, to know His incredible love, and to know that in Him, whatever happens in life, and whenever we face that last great enemy, defeated enemy, death, we will never be forgotten.

We will never be forsaken. So it's great to be Kingdom Harvesters in 2022. It's my greatest prayer for the church, and for myself, the courage, the strength, and the words, and the life that provokes questions of people, and that we have clear answers pointing them to Jesus, and to the hope of the gospel, and to this great message right in the heart of the Old Testament to people who felt abandoned and alone, that God has a purpose and a plan.

He's engraved them in the palm of their hands. He's like a nursing mother. May that be our experience also. Amen. Father, God help us to understand you and know you better.

[27 : 20] Thank you for these pictures. Thank you because you condescend to give us simple pictures that we can understand. I mean, you're the sovereign God of the universe. You could use all kinds of scientific or mathematical or philosophical images that would blow our minds, but you don't do that.

You give us simple pictures that we understand about mums and about dads and about children and about eating and drinking and about water.

Little everyday ordinary things, bread and wine, because you want us to understand. You don't want us baffled by intellectualism and by concepts that are meaningless or insignificant.

You want us to understand who you are. You've done that most powerfully in the incarnation and Jesus and God becoming flesh so that we can understand God and yet be utterly speechless by a God nailed to a cross out of his outstanding love for us, that he was willing to take the wrath and the separation and the death that we deserve because of our sin and take it entirely in our place so that we can have his righteousness, his goodness, his perfection and no adoption into God's family.

May we remind ourselves of these simple truths. May we not become people who look for great stuff that's deep and meaningful but doesn't act our lives in our daily walk, help us to find our walk moved by the simple truths of the gospel that are embedded in our hearts.

[29 : 12] May that be our experience today. Bless us. We thank you again for this year that has passed. We pray for your protection and guidance and help and your gifts, all that we need moving into 2022 for your glory.

We ask these things. Amen.